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ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 12

U.S.NEWS & WORLD REPORT
20 April 1987

The Moscow spy scandal spreads

How to protect U.S. embassies

■ Just as he seemed to be controlling the damage from the Iran-Contra debacle, Ronald Reagan now finds his administration ensnared in another crisis that could be every bit as threatening to national security. A growing sex-for-secrets scandal in the supersensitive U.S. Embassy in the Soviet Union has the President scrambling once again to appear in command but not responsible for the episode. By blaming the Kremlin while hinting broadly that the implications for U.S.-Soviet relations "are widespread," the President has so far avoided heavy damage, but leaders of both the State Department and Marine Corps are coming under heavy fire.

For now, as the bad news tumbles down, Reagan insists that the Soviets will not occupy their new complex in Washington until the U.S. is convinced that its new Moscow embassy is secure. It's likely, however, that the new diplomatic complex, rising next to the current embassy, will have to be destroyed and rebuilt because it is hopelessly riddled with snooping devices, all of which may never be detected and removed.

How widespread the danger?

With evidence of a major security breach mounting, a shaken Washington is looking at embassies in other capitals, fearing that they may be equally vulnerable. And with State Department plans to construct new embassies in six Communist nations—East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and China—over the next two years, the search for solutions is already well under way. Remedies for the problem are expensive, however, and the quick fixes now under consideration would seem to do little to address long-term security concerns.

The arrest last week of still another Marine—Sgt. John Weirick, 26, of Eureka, Calif.—on suspicion of espionage during a 1981-82 tour at the Leningrad consulate brings to four the number of Marine guards implicated in the evolving scandal. There are also indications that the "fraternization" with Soviet women, as the State Department delicately puts it, is not limited to embassy guards. U.S. officials say that improper contacts with Soviet citizens, as well as other problems, have led to the recall of nine of 26 Americans sent to Moscow this year as support employes. The Americans had replaced some of the Soviet workers who were pulled out last fall amid a diplomatic showdown.

The current debacle, the worst ever to hit U.S. embassy security, is sending tremors through the White House and the Pentagon, but the diplomats in the State Department, and particularly Secretary of State George Shultz, have been hardest hit. With Shultz in Moscow this week for three days of talks with Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, security specialists at State must insure that he will have secure communications. President Reagan refused to scrub the trip, saying it must not seem that the U.S. was "run out of town."

Yet there remains a strong presumption that the old embassy is a security sieve, infested with electronic bugging devices believed to have been hidden by the Soviets with the connivance of the Marines. Washington has shipped to Moscow a trailer with state-of-the-art gear said to insure that Shultz can send and receive messages without interception. In the embassy, he may use a new 8-by-10-foot cubicle meant to replace "the bubble," a superinsulated room whose security may have been broken.

More unsettling news about the old embassy came from two lawmakers who flew to Moscow for snap inspections. Representatives Dan Mica (D-Fla.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Me.) discovered in the existing building substandard security alarm systems and heard Marine complaints that diplomats paid no heed to security procedures. Snowe called the situation inside the embassy a " 'hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil' tendency towards . . . security." The two also said they found "hard evidence" of bugging in the new embassy but declined to elaborate.

Back home, as the Central Intelligence Agency and other departments weigh solutions, the rhetorical heat is being turned up by lawmakers—and not all of them are Democrats. Embarrassed by yet another scandal during Reagan's watch, the Senate Republican leadership has proposed tough measures curbing U.S. travel by Cuban and East-bloc envoys and demanding that the Kremlin pay for removing embassy bugs. "If the Soviets play this dangerous game," says Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kans.), "two can play."

At the White House, Reagan aides maintain that the President cannot be blamed for the scandal. True, they concede, his own advisory panel did warn in 1985 of trouble brewing at the Moscow embassy, and a Senate panel echoed the caution only last year. But they also argue that the problems predate Reagan's arrival—and, in fact, such espionage is far from new. What are new are the apparent extent of the damage and the alleged cooperation of Marine guards, whose service projects an image of utter incorruptibility.

Much of the past spying has occurred because the Americans either failed to take into account Soviet cleverness or were simply negligent. In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, U.S. diplomats in Moscow felt their cars provided airtight security. They slowly tumbled to the fact that their radios had been "adjusted" by Soviet mechanics to serve as two-way radios, broadcasting all that was said to the KGB. More recently, in the 1970s, Marines were caught giving to Soviet citizens papers earmarked for burning. Compromised by Russian women, the Marines were blackmailed by the KGB into selling the only documents they could lay hands on—the contents of burn bags.

In perhaps the most curious instance, a shipment of typewriters from the U.S. wound up in an unguarded embassy room adjacent to the workshop of one "Radio Sasha," resident Soviet electronics wizard. When the typewriters went into use, U.S. officials found many had been transformed, no doubt by Sasha, into transmitting devices. "If they see a vulnerability," says a veteran U.S. envoy, "they exploit it."

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Soviet efforts to undermine security at U.S. embassies are nothing new. If the stories of KGB defectors are credible, the campaign is strongest, and most effective, in Eastern Europe, followed by friendly Third World countries. Other targets for KGB penetration of U.S. stations: Hong Kong, New Delhi, Paris, Brussels, Geneva and Vienna.

Older Marines, tighter rules

For years, the CIA has pointed out security problems to the diplomats at the State Department, who apparently paid little heed. Some of the recommended precautions cost big money. But others—as investigators from two congressional panels, the Pentagon and a special presidential commission are already learning—require just plain old common sense. Some prescriptions, for instance, would require that:

- Marines sent to sensitive posts be married, older—over 25—and more experienced, having served at least one hitch. Employing younger leathernecks and depriving them of females is to invite disaster. One proposal calls for guards to take twice-yearly lie-detector tests, as CIA employes now do. Moscow might also be made a special hardship post, with Marines rotated every 90 days.
- Embassy workers avoid using word processors or even electronic typewriters, both of which emit signals that may be picked up. When possible, employes should shun electronic transmissions and instead use the tried-and-true diplomatic pouch.
- Only architectural and engineering firms with security clearances be hired to build top-secret embassy communications centers. Although clearances are now required, a survey has shown that 30 centers—including the one in Moscow—were being built by firms lacking proper credentials.

Obviously, some of the other proposed remedies will be expensive, requiring more-elaborate facilities and well-paid security personnel. The most expensive single project, however, could well be in Moscow. As *U.S. News* first reported last year, the new embassy compound is so shot through with bugs, many sown in concrete used for the foundation and walls, that the $191 million structure may be a total loss and need to be destroyed. Any hope that the new embassy was not completely vulnerable vanished last week with disclosure of a yet unpublished Senate Foreign Relations Committee report. It found that a Soviet émigré named Herman Silber was hired in 1975 by the San Francisco architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill to help design the new embassy. Apparently working without security clearances, he finished in about five months, then vanished. Moscow later said he died of a heart attack. Commented an astounded Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.): "Our general contractor is the KGB.... When you come right down to it, that's what it is."

Not all the news on the horizon is bleak, however, and some solutions under consideration could actually wind up saving money. Intelligence experts in Washington want the State Department to drop its $250 million plan to link all embassies by computer. Even amateur hackers have shown that the most sophisticated system can be cracked with enough time, effort and brains.

For all the hand wringing in the U.S., America has resorted to aggressive tactics of its own in the unending superpower spy war. It planted bugs in the chancery of the Soviet Union's new $65 million Washington diplomatic complex when it was being built in 1979.

It is ironic that the Moscow spy caper now could provide the excuse some have long sought to prevent the Soviets from using their new Washington embassy, still unoccupied. Approved during the cozier days of détente, the complex sprawls atop one of the capital's highest hills, vastly improving Moscow's access to sensitive U.S. government telecommunications. In the long run, America's Moscow losses, humiliating as they are, may well be outweighed by the vacancy sign at the Soviet Embassy. ■

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